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ABSTRACT

Recent research has begun to examine heterosexual male behavior and the early experiences of masculinity. This pilot research project used naturalistic inquiry methodologies to investigate the experience and education of boys/young men in relation to matters of sexual health and masculinity and to develop an understanding of the relationship among values, beliefs, and action. Over an 11-month period, in-depth interviews were conducted with 39 boys/young men between the ages of 11 and 21, all residing in England. The methodological experience regarding these interviews, and a model which was developed to understand the formation of values and identity among young men, are emphasized in this paper. Results indicate that participants appeared to deal on two separate levels with the anxieties associated with entering secondary education: the private and the public. In the private context, boys were exploring concepts such as doubt, independence, fear, romance, uncertainty, academic pressure, and anxiety. In peer groups, boys struggled with ideas like solidarity, mutual trust, and conformity. The evidence suggests a developmental model, in which young men pass through different phases in their private/public relationships. (RJM)

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Boys Growing Up: understanding boys' sexual health education and its implications for attitude change

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Abstract

This paper reports on a recently completed pilot research project[1] which used naturalistic inquiry methodologies to investigate the experience and education of boys/young men in relation to matters of sexual health and masculinity, and to develop an understanding of the relationship between values, beliefs and action. Over a period of eleven months, in-depth interviews were conducted with 39 boys/young men between the ages of 11 and 21, all located in and around a market town in the East of England. This paper concentrates on two aspects of this study: (1) the methodological experience, and (2) a basic model for understanding the formation of values and identity among young men which was developed, somewhat unexpectedly, towards the end of the project. A more detailed report of the project, plus six case studies, can be obtained from the authors of this paper.

Background

Until recently gender issues have focussed on feminity and girls' schooling, with masculinity being regarded as the norm and therefore unproblematic (Mac an Ghaill (1994). However, in recent years the feminist perspective has problematised heterosexual male behaviour (Brittan, 1989; Holland et al, 1993), and masculinity has come to be regarded as a social construct (e.g. Brod, 1987; Davidson, 1990) and, therefore, a context-bound phenomenon. It seemed that boys[2] grew up in an atmosphere of anxiety and baffled isolation with regards to their personal wellbeing and sexual health (e.g. Fisher, 1993; Walker, 1994; Bruckenwell et al, 1995; Winn et al, 1995), and writers such as Lee, C. (1993), Phillips (1993) and Brannen et al (1994) saw this inadequacy contributing to an inter-generational cycle of deprivation.

Currently much British research and media attention is being given to boys and young men - most of it pathologising the early experience of masculinity. There are common focuses on boys' failure at school compared to girls' recent achievements (e.g. Marshall, 1996), their self-distancing from sex education (e.g.

[1] funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council, ref.R000221592
[2] This study covered a wide age range (11-21): in searching for a suitable term for the respondents we decided to use that which they most used themselves i.e. 'boys'

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Sex Education Forum, 1996), peer pressure and experimentation as motivation for starting sexual experience (e.g. Ingham, 1997), their reluctance to seek help on personal or medical matters (e.g. Lloyd, 1996; MacLeod & Barter, 1996), risk-taking and substance abuse (e.g. Plant & Plant, 1992; Banman & Ennett, 1996), rising crime and suicide rates (e.g. McColl, A. 1993; Hill, 1995), young male unemployment and the changing perception of roles for husbands and fathers (e.g. Bennett, 1996; Burke, 1996). Our research saw some of these issues in a different light.

Methodology

Since this was a small study, we were cautious about compromising depth of understanding with too ambitious a range of respondents. There is an argument for a large, stratified sample encompassing a wide range of variables. In this case, however, our primary aim was to understand experiences and perspectives which were typical, which implied a range, and which were portrayed with all their contingencies. It was an understanding of a typical transition, for example from one state of thinking to another, that was the target - not the capacity to state with confidence that certain numbers of young men thought this or that.

Proposed methodology

We intended to use a two-stage methodology:

1. to conduct an interview survey of 30 boys/young men, contacted via schools, youth clubs, and developmental techniques such as 'snowballing' (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Lee, M. 1993) taking account of the following:

- that the age of the boys/young men was spread across the range 12 to 20. (Young men from the older age groups would be asked to look back and comment on their former selves as well as on the present circumstances. Experience at CARE has shown that although this technique may lose immediacy, it is more than compensated for by the young people's new-found maturity which enables them to look back and thus overcome any embarrassment which may have been present at the time.)
- that boys who lived in different family arrangements were represented, e.g.one-parent families, those who had extended family ties
- that the sample of boys/young men was as representative as possible, given the numbers involved, in other respects such as class and race, rural/urban backgrounds

The interviews were to be semi-structured and would begin by exploring the following areas with the boys/young men involved:

- their experience of sex education (in its broadest sense) in the home
- their experience of sex education in other contexts, e.g. at school, amongst friends
- those whom they turned to for information, advice, support

- their views on communication within the family in a general sense
- how they felt communication within the family might be improved
- how they felt sex education in general might be improved
- how they related their sex education to their own sexual health
- examples of good practice that they had experienced

2. to produce six case studies involving individual volunteers and (where appropriate) their social/family circles, recruited via the survey sample of young men. By completion of the survey, we expected to have a range of individuals to choose from and the choice would be made according to those boys/young men that appeared to exemplify particular patterns of communication elucidated via the survey. The case studies were to aim to:

- embed experiences, conversations and learnings in a lived context
- generate more detailed accounts from boys about the issues raised in the survey

In the event, things didn't go quite to plan ....

Actual methodology

1. Survey

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 39 boys aged between 11 and 21. This totalled more than the proposed 30, since some of the boys indicated that they would prefer to be interviewed in groups. These group interviews enabled triangulation of responses given by individuals and by groups, and gave important insights into group dynamics - an unforeseen element which became a central feature of the research. While most of the interviews were one-off, some respondents were interviewed several times to follow up a particular line of enquiry. Interestingly, our experience was that boys who had originally been interviewed in a group situation were unwilling to be singled out for further interviews, whilst those who had been interviewed 1:1 originally were happy to continue on that basis.

In addition to the interviews, we conducted a small number of observations of boys out and about and socialising.

This phase had been intended to seek out examples of good practice the boys had experienced in terms of their sex education, communication and support systems. In the event, the survey phase met with a surprisingly (to us) homogenous pattern of negativity - despite a methodology designed to highlight diversity. Boys from all walks of life appeared to unite in denying the utility of the sex education they had received from whatever source, and in confirming their emotional isolation from each other and from older males. There were few exceptions. The study, therefore, began to concentrate on understanding this universal negativity, as we considered it necessary to interpret these barriers to communication before educative strategies could be found.

Also, we came to see the concept of attitude change as an unhelpful one, implying as it does some form of intervention or experience changing one way of thinking and believing for another. Examples of useful interventions being conspicuous by their absence, the research developed a model of a more emergent, developmental formation.

Due to these unexpected aspects, more time was spent on the survey phase than had been planned. The research timetable broke down and the case studies were begun alongside the survey. The two approaches came to inform each other as they progressed in parallel.

2. Case studies

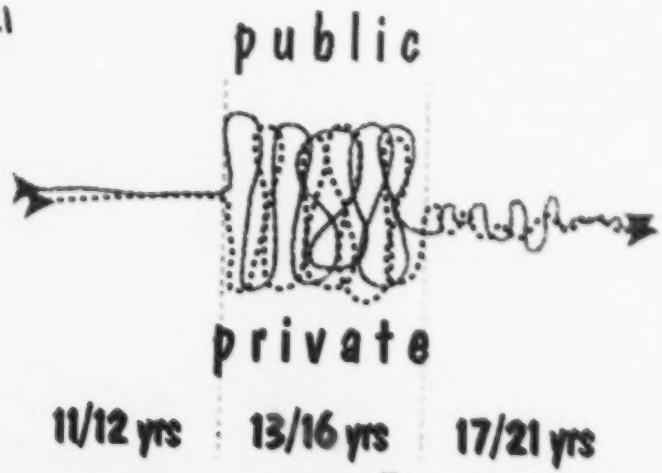
It had been proposed that a second stage of the research would consist of six case studies of individual boys who would exemplify particular patterns of learning and self-formation. Since, as already stated, any such patterns were difficult to find, case studies were constructed, instead, around themes of diverse experiences. Some featured individuals, whilst others were issue-based. The purpose of the case studies was to view individual data within the broader context of that person's life and social contacts - to see the connections and contingencies. However, time limitations intervened leaving this aspect of the research underdeveloped.

3. Data analysis

As proposed, data analysis was carried out alongside the fieldwork (Guba & Lincoln, 1988), employing 'progressive focussing' (Parlett & Hamilton, 1977). Nevertheless, during the final writing up we were surprised to see the themes we had identified during the course of the study dividing into two strands, and the following theoretical model emerging:

The public/private model

Caveat - This model appeared at the end of the data-collection period of the study and thus is as yet untested with the boys themselves (though we are currently seeking funding for this purpose). Therefore the diagram and summary below constitute 'work in progress'.



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We should be careful not to fall into the trap of imagining that our concern with identity construction and attitude formation is confined to the early years of masculinity (Erikson, 1965, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Harré, 1983). Even so it seems reasonable that the emerging consciousness of their bodies plus the external social pressures combine to maximise the need for adjustment and personal theorising in young men during their adolescent years. For many, the onset of these pressures coincided with the move to secondary school around the age of 12 where, as one young man said, *"life totally changes. (before that) we had no worries in the world"*. Suddenly the presence of near-adult older pupils, the threat of increased violence, emphasis on qualifications for adult life, the perceived imperative to find new ways of relating to girls, plus physical and emotional changes, combined to shift their focus from the present to the future. And the future was worrying, uncharted territory.

The boys we spoke to appeared to be dealing with these anxieties on two simultaneous fronts: working to build a private self and working to construct a public self. In their private contexts these boys were exploring concepts such as doubt, independence, fear, romance, uncertainty, academic pressure, and anxiety. There was some evidence that they were building a personal moral code. This was a reflective context, spoken of in degrees of sophistication. In peer group contexts they seemed to be learning solidarity, mutual trust, conformity: learning the banter of affability - the only language of affection they felt was allowed between heterosexual men; learning to be part of a team. Here was more of a context of demonstration and assertion.

The friendship group, while giving a sense of structure and belonging, could feel an inappropriate and unsympathetic place to voice individual thoughts. The private selves they were building had to be modified when required to fit into the group ethos. Nonetheless, they were learning things about their private selves within the public sphere. It was here that they tried out images and discovered which ones they were comfortable with. Here they could explore talents such as sport, wit, art, getting on with people, getting off with girls, that they took back into their private selves and which became part of the people they were. Similarly it was a way of discovering what they were not good at, and could therefore reject.

There were even some suggestions that our respondents were conscious of shifts of gear between their public and private worlds. Certainly there were indications that they were moving between contexts in purposeful and thoughtful ways, apparently theorising about themselves as social actors and as citizens. As one young man said, in talking about finding a new group of friends, *"That's when I started to build the jokey, laughy, get into a bit of trouble, he-smokes-the-odd-joint, kind of thing, you know? . . . That's really when I found the identity of a young person I suppose. It was negative and non-productive in certain ways, but it was very productive in getting a feeling of self, I think."*

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There was evidence to suggest the case for a developmental model - that young men pass through different phases in their private/public relationships. Not that these phases need to be anchored into age-ranges, but that we can imagine a rhythm and a profile to the learning experience. So, for example, for the older respondents, life seemed to be getting easier. They said they were more confident and felt more responsible. There appeared to be more scope for individual expression, and group rules were losing their tyranny - more choices were available.

Some of the young men had reached this point by overcoming difficulties such as travel during a 'year out', surviving parents' divorce, or coming out as gay. For others, the first steady girlfriend (or close female friend) often provided the necessary support. As reported to us, the conversational aspect seemed more important than the sexual relationship. Finally the boys had someone who would listen, with whom they could share their private selves, helping to clarify their thoughts and attitudes. Then, armed with her acceptance, they could venture back into the group. Though they might find that the group was changing anyway as more of its members acquired a similar confidence. Public selves, perhaps, were becoming more private, and private selves were beginning to come out into the light.

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S. Kushner
March 1997

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